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ABSTRACT

The speaker provides an overview of some of the socioeconomic factors that are influencing people in the United States and a list of changes that some parochial schools are making to adapt to the changing conditions in the society. (IRT)

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PAROCHIAL EDUCATION: RESPONDING TO GOD'S NOW

The Question

I wish to pose a question: Given God's abounding love on one hand, and the great variety of human needs on the other hand, what is the mission and role of the parochial school right now?

This is not a new or unusual question. The histories of Catholic and Lutheran schools give us ample evidence that our forefathers, and in many cases foremothers, were continuously concerned about that question. But now in this 1975-76 school year of our Lord it is our turn to question how effectively we are responding to God's now, to reexamine our mission and our role.

A portion of this task is relatively simple because God's abounding love doesn't change. His statements and directives are from everlasting to everlasting. His resources are always in abundance. His law, His Gospel, His provision of people and things never ceases. Your presence here today is evidence of that. And God's promises never expire, they have no deadlines. Thus our theology concerning "why" we should be involved, and "why" we should respond is quite clear.

Schools Are Church

It is clear, that is, as long as we remember that our schools are church. It seems so ironic at times that we constantly need to impress the government, the Supreme Court, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and much of the general public that we are in the education, the school business. While on the other hand we also need to remind much of our own constituency that we are engaged in the mission and ministry of the church.

Perhaps we also, those of us most closely connected with parochial schools need to remind ourselves why we are in business. As we respond to God's now "we are first of all, and fundamentally, defenders and promoters of the Christian faith."[1]

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Donald Erickson reminds us that he finds, as he reads the history of nonpublic schools, that "no church-related group has ever survived abandonment of a central emphasis on ethnic and/or theological distinctiveness."[2]

As we zero in on church and religion and as we respond to the now of people's needs, we become all the more cognizant of the fact that we are not only dealing with the cognitive but place great emphasis on the affective and psychomotor realms as well.

In fact, faith and love are both in the affective realm. But we are often guilty of attempting to make faith too cognitive, and isolate it as though it only had "heavenly" connotations. But we need to constantly live and teach that faith is also very "earthy." Sister Mary Eileen McNerney puts it so well as she titles a film strip about Catholic schools "This School is about Life."[3]

Life - the now of people's needs. Are they the real concerns of our church and our schools? They always have been, or at least so we have said. We often express the mission and ministry of the church in these terms:

> The mission and ministry of the church is to provide opportunities to worship, to learn more about God and man, to witness to others, to develop community and fellowship, and to help and serve one another.

That should sound very familiar to you. It has been said so often before. The Pastoral Message on Catholic Education TO TEACH AS JESUS DID presents the very same mission, only states it in just three phrases:

> To teach doctrine, to build community, to serve.[4]

There is no doubt that we must respond to God's now, as church and as school, by responding to the basic human needs of His people - His people locally, throughout America, and all over this globe. For we dare not only teach doctrine and worship, but we must also <u>build community</u>, and <u>witness</u>, and <u>educate</u>, and <u>serve one another</u>.

<u>God's Now People</u>

I would like to try to take a brief look at some of the people who make up

God's now, his "now" people. Who are they? What are their concerns, their joys, their hurts, their attitudes and goals?

Now Needs

God's now people need the basics: food, clothing, shelter, love. And they know from experience that in this materialistic great American society these basics are becoming very difficult to come by. We all are aware of some of the effects of inflation and the recession. But most of God's people have probably felt that pinch far more than most of us in this room today. Our economy is finally experiencing a slight recuperation from its deepest, broadest, and most prolonged slump since the depression of the 1930's. But Sylvia Porter in a recent series of articles in the WASHINGTON STAR provides documentation indicating that this economic recovery may easily abort within a few months.[5]

What does it do to the spirit of business, industry, to the executive, the laborer and their families when they are constantly beleaguered by inflation, high interest, unemployment, and large deficits?

Eighty-five and four-tenths millions of God's people are out of work. That is one out of every twelve, mostly blacks, teenagers, and women. Of the heads of households one out of 18 has no job, many of these between the ages of 20 and 30. In 1980, only five years from now, 60% more people will reach the age of 21 than in the 60's. They would experience high unemployment even in more prosperous times. Inflation is staying on its 6 - 8% rampage and it appears that we are running out of answers on how to stop it.

Now Feelings

What does it do to people who are trying to survive a modern industrial society? The Episcopal priest, the Rev. Malcolm Boyd, believes that it drains us of our primal energy, "it leaves so little energy for the development of one's human feelings and relationships."[6]

Human feelings and relationships, that whole area that love and forgiveness is all about, are breaking down. Many people can be classified as "robopaths" says

Lewis Yablonsky.[7] Robopath is the term used to identify a person who has become socially dead. Americans are so dehumanized, he believes, that many could be described as "the walking dead" because we live in a world that is wired for death.

Hariett Van Horne, the columnist, in an article titled "Now We Are Living in an 'Age of Terror'" states that a major growing characteristic of our society is the inhumanity of man. Think of it, at a time when we get the feeling that we are making some progress in the area of human relationships and empathy we discover that the growing characteristic of society is man's inhumanity. The movie "Cipher in the Snow," produced by Brigham Young University, vividly indicates how our inhumanness and lack of sensitivity toward others can lead them to think of themselves as cipers, big empty zeros, nothings.

Now Spirituality

Another view of God's now people reveals another facet of their multi-image. Even though our population has increased, attendance at our various churches has dropped. Since 1963 the Catholic Church has experienced a 33% drop in church attendance, according to the National Catholic Opinion Research Center. The Center states that such statistics do not necessarily reflect less concern on the part of people with their religious lives, but it indicates their reservations about religious institutions.[8]

Inner-church tensions run high these days. We have our share in the Lutheran church and they are far from over. I am certain that the Catholic church is also not exempt from conflict. In fact, our situation reminds me at times of Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof" when he speaks to God "It's true that we are the Chosen People. But once in a while can't You choose someone else?"[9]

During such conflicts the laity lose confidence in the church's leadership. We, the church's educators, are also part of that leadership. Some people are losing confidence in us and thus in our schools. Also, there seems to be a movement within some churches that sets a "convert count" as its major goal (evangelism) at the ex-

pense of "nurture" (Christian education). There also seems to be a mission zeal that seems to be more ligitimate in areas where the new parish might quickly become self-supporting, or overseas, both at the expense of the tremendously rich mission fields at home in the urban centers.

Many of God's now people are caught up in fundamentalist movements, in charismatic experiences, and even many people outside the church have a sincere concern for a return to an emphasis on values, the kind which can be acquired only through personal moral and apiritual development.

This seems to me to be very logical, for we also have those, and I think they exist in large numbers within and outside the church, who actually view so much of the church and so many of its denominations as being far from Jesus and far from the true Bible. They see the church being more concerned about buildings, bureaucracy, careerism and fundraising. How can we respond to God's now people who see us in that perspective?

Now Conditions

What else do we know about God's now people? Less than half of today's high school seniors, 44%, have definite plans to go to college, another 27% say they might. One out of every ten seniors plans to attend a vocational school while one of every five has no plans for any additional formal education. The latter figure is a significant increase over a year ago. At increasingly higher rates male and non-whites are indicating no college plans.

Each year larger numbers of people above high school age are being classified as poor and being written off as non-functional. They are often subject to violence and crime and are very paranoid. To make matters worse, those more fortunate persons who have been helping to feed the poor apparently seem to be getting tired of doing so. George Bernard Shaw's statement still stands: The worst sin is not to hate your fellowman, but to be indifferent toward him.

So what is left for many? They can't afford to live, they certainly can't afford to get sick or grow old, not even afford to die. We must face up to the fact that many people don't laugh, they experience no facets of the good life, they have no hope and no joy, their entire goal is merely survival.[11] Can our ministry reach them?

We so often assume, at least our church programs seem to reflect this, that nearly everyone lives in heterogeneous family settings. We must realize that of God's now people who are 18 years of age and above, one out of three is single. They also have needs. Divorce and its ramifications on the lives of adults and children is alarming, adding up to more needs that require our response. We know that certain eating, drinking, and smoking habits of women before and during pregnancy can do irreparable damage to a child's capacity to learn. Is the communication of that type of information, so necessary for the adults, also a part of the ministry of the schools?

Today we are attempting to serve the three and four year olds through many early childhood programs. Projections reveal that by the time that group is 18 years of age (1990) 35%, including whites and nonwhites, will live in educationally deprived areas. Thirty percent of the 18 year old population will be nonwhite.[12] During the next five, ten, and fifteen years these children will be moving through the elementary, high school, and college levels.

Now School Enrollments

I am certain that the average parochial school is not serving that high a percentage of nonwhites or educationally deprived students today. The question is, can we serve them? Will they allow us to serve them? Will our schools actually be viable alternatives for them? At that rate nearly every school will reach the normal tipping point. When that happens will the parents of white children continue to allow us to serve their children also?

On the basis of these figures some authorities are questioning the ability of private colleges to survive after 1990. Does that spell similar trouble for the private high school in 1985, and the nonpublic elementary school within the next decade?

Will the average parochial school student of the future be Catholic and Lutheran? The number of infant baptisms and our back door losses will certainly affect our Lutheran enrollments. Within the last decade our rate of infant baptisms has dropped 29.4% and only two out of every three of those baptized children are still with the Lutheran church at the age of 13 (67.27%).[13] But in spite of this, Lutheran school enrollments at the elementary level have dropped only slightly and the early childhood and secondary levels continue to gain. There is evidence that many schools are reaching out to serve nonLutheran homes. Over a third of our students come from homes of parents who are not members of the congregations that operate the schools.[14] What does this mean in terms of purpose, support, the teaching of the faith, recruitment?

Of the children whose parents are members of school supporting parishes we are enrolling a little over one-half of them (57%), or about one-third of our church's total child membership. Many parents who do not send their children to Lutheran schools have no idea of what we are about. In fact, many oppose us. Most of us are very guilty of taking commitment for granted. We take it for granted in ourselves, our pastors, our teachers, and in the parents. When we fail to continue to work for commitment - it is soon lost.

Enrollment shifts of various kinds force schools to reexamine their financial base, a movement already underway in some areas. Normal Sunday morning church contributions no longer pay all of the bills. At times some of a school's clientele are the persons who can least afford it. Can a church be faithful to its mission if it only ministers to those who can pay?

Now Attitudes

Many of God's now people are very unhappy with public education. They are concerned about public education because it seemingly continues to attempt to raise taxes, salaries are raised - especially after a teacher strike, they deploy forced busing, have a high rate and intensity of vandalism, physical threats and abuse to teachers and pupils abound, truancy is commonplace, and they also seem to have lost the "basics" and thus cannot maintain an adequate level of educational quality. Parochial school must realize now more than ever that they can respond to many of the needs of God's children today by cooperating with public education and by attempting to help upgrade it. Yes, public education is a vast area that is also a concern of our mission. I am happy that our church is and others have seen fit to declare it so through formal resolutions.

Six Flags amusement park outside of St. Louis did not set an all-time mark for attendance this past summer, but its income was the highest ever. People spent more after they arrived inside the park than formerly. Some have suggested that this reflects that people feel they ought to take one last fling before the price of gasoline really goes out of sight. Perhaps, but maybe that pattern also reflects the fulfilling of other needs.

Now Factors

Children and their parents are extremely mobile, some can afford it, some cannot, some by choice, others through force. As a result they claim no piece of turf as their own, they don't buy into a community, a church, a school, or even a job. Is it any wonder there is a lack of caring, concern, and pride in home, neighborhood, or self?

As real estate prices and rents change, the socio-economic levels of residents, as they come and go, may often change several times in a given community, often with some rapidity. God's people to whom we minister today may be altogether different than the people to whom we might be asked to minister tomorrow.

Some of you are continually challenged to attempt to serve tremendous varieties of people simultaneously in our multi-cultural cities. But let us not forget that all the multi-cultural existence is not limited to the large metropolitan areas. For example, the number of languages spoken as a first language in the relatively sparcely populated state of Oregon is 61.[15]

Another statistic: nearly one-half of all immigrants who came to the United States during the last four years were from Latin America (41%) and 30% from Asia. These represent significant shifts, especially since 1960.[16] And when "Latin children make the transition from their culture to that of the U.S., the values they know become rapidly diluted, if not totally lost," states the recent issue of Momentum (cocacolonization).[17] What do these factors about people mean for our schools?

Changes Needed

Much more could be said about the people we are attempting to serve in God's now. We have not tried to exhaust the infinite differences in people and their resulting needs at all socio-economic levels and in all demographic possibilities. The point is, we are attempting to serve God's people where they are today, trying to fulfill today's needs, not yesterday's. We are attempting to change in order to meet change while we are also attempting to retain the theological cornerstone of the parochial school, its strength, Jesus Christ.

Schools need to show through action that they do not operate as though they were dens of antiquity.[18] "Planned change proceeds from a recognition of new needs."[19] There must be a process of introspection. An introspection that looks at today's needs and today's response. An introspection that lets the Spirit search. An introspection that must be carried on in the light of the eternal victory which is already ours in Christ.[20]

William Kennedy of the World Council of Churches states that "the capacity for change is the ability to remain open to change in the direction of what is more

human, that is, what fulfills what we know of the potential of human beings judged by the Christian faith ... To be without capacity to change is to be dead."[21]

How well are parochial schools responding to God's now? I honestly don't know the complete answer to that. William Pharis, the executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, recently told me that he doesn't feel any system of education in our country is meeting today's needs. He thinks we are doing quite poorly and that nonpublic schools are not meeting the needs any better than is the public sector.

Evidence of Change

Perhaps he is correct. I would like to believe that both systems are meeting some of the needs, but we know there is much room for improvement, and your presence here indicates your concern. But I think I see some signs of hope. Let me enumerate only a few:

- Some schools are voluntarily attempting to take the monopoly of education away from teachers, principals, DCE's, and the pastors and are sharing it with parents, and children, and the community and parish.
- Some schools are learning to cope with state and federal legislative and judicial pressures, abiding by the law, protesting the injustices, taking comfort from the position statements of the minority, hoping for a more enlightened day, and gearing up to a commitment that is determined to carry on.
- Some schools are concerned about the very youngest of the children and also include their parents as they operate early childhood, toddler, and parenting programs.
- Some schools are trying to be accountable, accountable for their funds, accountable to children and parents for teaching and learning, accountable to Boards of Education, congregations and to their Lord.

- Some schools are gradually weaning themselves away from a blind reliance on IQ tests that do not measure intelligence and away from a false confidence in achievement tests which do not measure the total quality nor quantity of teaching and learning.
- Some schools are seriously studying their congregations and communities, the pertinent demographics, the needs of their people, their philosophy, objectives, and program offerings.
- Some schools are devising curricula that stand a good chance of equipping every graduate with 1) usable and salable credentials and skills in order that they might successfully face some of the realities of life, 2) hope and beauty-sustaining aesthetics in order that children might experience the wonders and precious qualities of life, and 3) with human and spiritual relationships in order that those who learn might be able to communicate, relate, empathize, share feelings, know God and live in the eternal hope.
- Some schools are capitalizing on their unique strengths and their theologically based philosophy as they give special attention to the personalization of education: experimenting and innovating; becoming more human, more effective; adding a variety of alternatives; employing bilingual instruction; expanding urban education centers; establishing central learning centers and classroom interest centers; organizing compensatory programs for older pupils; establishing special education classes; going outside the four walls; adding adult programs; establishing high priority goals concerned with unique worth, self image, character and faith; and many other actions in attempts to better respond to people's individual needs.
- Some schools are searching for new ways in which they can work together, ways in which they can cross denominational lines at local levels, organize into nonpublic school groups at local and state levels and join and support the work of the Council for American Private Education at the

national level in order to learn from one another, to serve one another, to have a common voice, and relate and communicate to the communities and the nation in ways never before attempted.

- Some schools are greatly expanding the teaching of theologically based human relations skills to parents, administrators, teachers and the youth through such programs as those sponsored by Effectiveness Training Associates and Lutheran Effectiveness Training.
- Some schools believe and take heart in the results of parochial school effectiveness research as reported in the Greeley-Rossi Study[22] and the Brekke research, HOW DIFFERENT ARE PEOPLE WHO ATTENDED LUTHERAN SCHOOLS?[23] a spin-off of the STUDY OF GENERATIONS.[24]
- Some schools have become more attentive to and minister to the needs of those who teach, to those who are constantly being asked to give of themselves to serve others, to drain themselves physically and mentally for the wellbeing of God's now people generally at salaries and fringe benefits below their professional counterparts in the public sector.

These are some very tough and involved educational concerns. These issues cannot be dodged if those of us engaged in parochial education are at all concerned about responding to God's now.

Jesus: "Touch!"

Jesus, the Master Teacher, has presented Christian educators many great lessons. I wish to close by mentioning two. These were lessons about touching and feeding.

When St. Peter attempted to walk on water (Matthew 14:25-33) and began to sink Jesus did not minister to him by first saying: "Peter, oh ye of little faith! I'm really disappointed in you. You are always so impulsive, quick to talk and act, and then can't follow through."

No, the first thing Jesus did was touch him - He grabbed him, He helped him - physically, through personal service. Then Jesus said to him, "You began to sink because you had too little faith. Why did you doubt?" And then He continued to teach and to love him, expecting and receiving so much from him in the future.

Peter did try to actually walk on water, and he did walk on the water. And so are you. You who are engaged in parochial education are risking much, you too are walking on water because you also saw Jesus. Follow His example, walk on water, and when others seem to need your help, first touch.

Jesus: "Feed!"

Before Jesus performed the miracle of feeding the five thousand (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) He really laid it on the disciples. Jesus asked the disciples to feed them, all 5000 plus. They objected on the grounds that there were too many people present, it was too late, they didn't have enough money between them to buy very much, and besides the people could try stopping in some of the villages on the way home and buy their own food.

Jesus countered, "No you don't - I want you to feed them. Let's check out some alternatives. Why not try pooling all of the food that people brought with them and perhaps that will take care of it."

The disciples knew that that was an impossible suggestion. They were even embarrassed to make their search. They felt like fools asking people if they had any food to contribute, they were going to get ready to feed the other 4,999 and didn't bring any supplies with them. In fact, when the young lad offered his five loaves and two fish Andrew couldn't resist coming out with a little put-down, "Huh, what's that little dab among so many?"

But everyone was fed because the GREAT CHEF Himself was present. He took charge, He blessed it.

Jesus has also told us to feed His lambs. He has given very clear directives to feed and to touch that are still mandates today - God's now.

He has also provided the resources - resources that often look to us today, during this time of God's now, like five loaves and two small fish - just a little dab.

But we also have His promises that He will be with us and bless us all the way, including today and way beyond.

The Question

I repeat the original question: Given God's abounding love on one hand, and the great variety of human needs on the other hand, what is the mission and role of the parochial school right now?

The Answer

I cherish the answer Father Michael O'Neill gives as he concludes his book, NEW SCHOOLS IN A NEW CHURCH:

> I look to a day when Catholic (Lutheran) Christian schools will clearly be "gospel communities of freedom and love," modeling themselves after the apostles and disciples in Jerusalem who gathered to pray, reminisce about Jesus, and plan for their work among men - and who one day realized that they were the Church.[25]

Footnotes:

[1]Al H. Senske. "A New Look at Private Education," Lutheran Education (January 1973), p. 219.

[2]Donald A. Erickson. "The Book of the Decade on Nonpublic Schools," The Independent School Bulletin (October 1972), p. 9.

[3]Sr. Mary Eileen McNerney. "This School is about Life," film strip with record, SCH 1026 (Alpha Corporation of America, 1975).

[4]National Conference of Catholic Bishops. To Teach as Jesus Did (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1973), pp. 3-9.

[5]Sylvia Porter. "Where Is Our Economy Headed?" Washington Star (October 6, 1975), pp. C-1, C-5.

[6]Anne Crutcher. "On Defining Sin in '70s - Rev. Boyd," Washington Star (October 6, 1975), pp. A-1, A-22, A-23.

[7]Lewis Yablonsky. Robopaths (New York: Penguin, 1972).

[8]Associated Press. "Church's stances cited in fall of Mass attendance," St. Louis Globe-Democrat (October 15, 1975), p. 6A.

[9]Joseph Stein. Fiddler on the Roof (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1964), p. 58.

[10]Editorial Services Division. "College Plans of High School Seniors," Finance Facts (October 1975), p. 1.

[11]Crutcher. Ibid.

[12]Harold Hodgkinson, Director, National Institute of Education. A personal statement from conversation with the Council for American Private Education, October 7, 1975.

[13]Dale E. Griffen. "Comparative Statistics for 1974," Inspirit (November 1975).

[14]Senske. "Want a Piece of the Rock?" Lutheran Education (May-June 1975), pp. 378-9.

[15]Hodgkinson. Ibid.

[16]Judith Seltzer, ed. "Give Me your Tired, Your Poor...," Interchange (September 1975), p. 3.

[17]Cheryl M. Keuser. "Adios to Cocacolonization," Momentum (October 1975), p. 29.

[18]Senske. "A New Look at Private Education," op. cit.

[19]Wayne G. Spitzer. "A Lutheran School Strategy for Change," School Bulletin, (April 1973), p. 3.

[20]Gerard Kohn. "Where Are We - The Church - Going?" Parish Education Bulletin (March 1965), p. 3.

[21]William B. Kennedy. "Capacity Crippled." Paper delivered by staff director of Division of Education, World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland, to Capacity for Change Consultation Ecumenical Institute, Bosset, France, April 1972.

[22]Andrew M. Greeley and Peter N. Rossi. The Education of Catholic Americans (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1966).

[23]Milo Brekke. How Different Are People Who Attended Lutheran Schools? (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974).

[24]Merton P. Strommen, et. al., A Study of Generations (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972).

[25]Michael O'Neill. New Schools in a New Church (Collegeville, MN: St. John's University Press, 1971), p. 118.